TELLS THE FACTS AND NAMES THE NAMES

CounterPunch

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An Indian Among the Homeboys

By Alexander Cockburn

Sudhir Venkatesh: *Gang Leader for A Day. A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets.* The Penguin Press, 2008. 320pp.

Forty years ago the topic of slums here, in the United States, was a lot hotter than it is now. For one thing, the Cold War was on. Soviet propaganda made hay with America's urban riots in the mid-1960s. The Black Panthers organized armed patrols, set up free lunch programs, and formed alliances with such urban gangs as Chicago's Blackstone Rangers. Sixties radicals started organizing in the ghettoes.

The Chicago cops duly murdered Black Panther leader Fred Hampton in his bed. Another Panther leader, Bobby Hutton, was gunned down by Oakland cops, after he surrendered following a police onslaught on the house he was living in. Malcolm X, the man who really frightened America's ruling orders, was gunned down in New York. Spiro Agnew, Nixon's vice president, advised a sense of distance. "If you've seen one city slum you've seen them all", he nonchalantly declared. Enlightened opinion duly looked the other way, and that's how it's been ever since.

When slum dwellers finally did press upon public attention, as the flood waters in New Orleans forced them onto the roofs of their homes and then onto the dry stretches of Interstate 10, armed police blocked the exit ramps. Plans rapidly unfurled to knock down the big Public Housing Projects, bulldoze the low income neighborhoods, and disperse the poor blacks into the hinterland.

COCKBURN CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

"The top contributors to the Obama campaign are the very Wall Street firms whose shady mortgage lenders buried the elderly and the poor and minority under predatory loans."

Obama's Money Cartel

How He's Fronted for the Most Vicious Firms on Wall Street

By Pam Martens

Wall Street, known variously as a barren wasteland for diversity or the last plantation in America, has defied courts and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) for decades in its failure to hire blacks as stockbrokers. Now it's marshalling its money machine to elect a black man to the highest office in the land. Why isn't the press curious about this?

Walk into any of the largest Wall Street brokerage firms today and you'll see a self-portrait of upper management racism and sexism: women sitting at secretarial desks outside fancy offices occupied by predominantly white males. According to the EEOC as well as the recent racial discrimination class actions filed against UBS and Merrill Lynch, blacks make up between 1 per cent to 3.5 per cent of stockbrokers - and this after 30 years of litigation, settlements and empty promises to do better by the largest Wall Street firms.

The first clue to an entrenched white male bastion seeking a black male occupant in the oval office (having placed only five blacks in the U.S. Senate in the last two centuries) appeared this month on a chart at the Center for Responsive Politics website. It was a list of the 20 top contributors to the Barack Obama campaign, and it looked like one of those comprehension tests where you match up things that go together and eliminate those that don't. Of the 20 top contributors, I eliminated six that didn't compute. I was now looking at a sight only slightly less frightening to democracy than a Diebold voting machine. It was a Wall Street cartel of financial firms, their registered lobbyists, and go-to law firms that have a death grip on our federal government.

Why is the "yes, we can" candidate in bed with this cartel? How can we, the people, make change if Obama's money backers block our ability to be heard?

Seven of the Obama campaign's top 14 donors consist of officers and employees of the same Wall Street firms charged time and again with looting the public and newly implicated in originating and/or bundling fraudulently made mortgages. These latest frauds have left thousands of children in some of our largest minority communities coming home from school to see eviction notices and foreclosure signs nailed to their front doors. Those scars will last a lifetime.

These seven Wall Street firms are (in order of money given): Goldman Sachs, UBS AG, Lehman Brothers, JP Morgan Chase, Citigroup, Morgan Stanley and Credit Suisse. There is also a large hedge fund, Citadel Investment Group, which is a major source of fee income to Wall Street. There are five large corporate law firms that are also registered lobbyists; and one is a corporate law firm that is no longer a registered lobbyist but does legal work for Wall Street. The cumulative total of these 14 contributors through February 1, 2008, was $2,872,128, and we're still in the primary season.

But hasn't Senator Obama repeatedly told us in ads and speeches and debates

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that he wasn't taking money from registered lobbyists? Hasn't the press given him a free pass on this statement?

Barack Obama, speaking in Greenville, South Carolina, on January 22, 2008:

"Washington lobbyists haven't funded my campaign, they won't run my White House, and they will not drown out the voices of working Americans when I am president".

Barack Obama, in an email to supporters on June 25, 2007, as reported by the *Boston Globe*:

"Candidates typically spend a week like this – right before the critical June 30th financial reporting deadline – on the phone, day and night, begging Washington lobbyists and special interest PACs to write huge checks. Not me. Our campaign has rejected the money-for-influence game and refused to accept funds from registered federal lobbyists and political action committees".

The Center for Responsive Politics' website allows one to pull up the filings made by lobbyists registering under the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995 with the clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives and secretary of the U.S. Senate. These top five contributors to the Obama campaign have filed as registered lobbyists: Sidley Austin LLP; Skadden, Arps, et al; Jenner & Block; Kirkland & Ellis; Wilmerhale, aka Wilmer Cutler Pickering.

Is it possible that Senator Obama does not know that corporate law firms are also frequently registered lobbyists? Or is he making a distinction that because these funds are coming from the employees of these firms, he's not really taking money directly from registered lobbyists? That thesis seems disingenuous when many of these individual donors own these law firms as equity partners or shareholders and share in the profits generated from lobbying.

Far from keeping his distance from lobbyists, Senator Obama and his campaign seems to be brainstorming with them.

Why is the "yes, we can" candidate in bed with this cartel? How can we, the people, make change if his money backers block our ability to be heard?

The political publication, *The Hill*, reported on December 20, 2007, that three salaried aides on the Obama campaign were registered lobbyists for dozens of corporations. (The Obama campaign said they had stopped lobbying since joining the campaign.) Bob Bauer, counsel to the Obama campaign, is an attorney with Perkins Coie. That law firm is also a registered lobbyist.

What might account for this persistent (but non-reality based) theme of distancing the Obama campaign from lobbyists? Odds are it traces back to one of the largest corporate lobbyist spending sprees in the history of Washington whose details would cast an unwholesome pall on the Obama campaign, unless our cognitive abilities are regularly bombarded with abstract vacuities of hope and change and sentimental homages to Dr. King and President Kennedy .

On February 10, 2005, Senator Obama voted in favor of the passage of the Class Action Fairness Act of 2005. Senators Biden, Boxer, Byrd, Clinton, Corzine, Durbin, Feingold, Kerry, Leahy, Reid and 16 other Democrats voted against it. It passed the Senate 72-26 and was signed into law on February 18, 2005.

Here is an excerpt of remarks Senator Obama made on the Senate floor on February 14, 2005, concerning the passage of this legislation:

"Every American deserves their day in court. This bill, while not perfect, gives people that day while still providing the reasonable reforms necessary to safeguard against the most blatant abuses of the system. I also hope that the federal judiciary takes seriously their expanded role in class action litigation, and upholds their responsibility to fairly certify class actions so that they may protect our civil and consumer rights..".

Three days before Senator Obama expressed that fateful yea vote, 14 state attorneys general, including Lisa Madigan of Senator Obama's home state of Illinois, filed a letter with the Senate and House, pleading to stop the passage of this corporate giveaway: The AGs wrote: "State attorneys general frequently investigate and bring actions against defendants who have caused harm to our citizens... In some instances, such actions have been brought with the attorney general acting as the class representative for the consumers of the state. We are concerned that certain provisions of S.5 might be misinterpreted to impede the ability of the attorneys general to bring such actions..".

The Senate also received a desperate plea from more than 40 civil rights and labor organizations, including the NAACP, Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, Human Rights Campaign, American Civil Liberties Union, Center for Justice and Democracy, Legal Momentum (formerly NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund), and Alliance for Justice. They wrote as follows:

"Under the [Class Action Fairness Act of 2005], citizens are denied the right to use their own state courts to bring class actions against corporations that violate these state wage and hour and state civil rights laws, even where that corporation has hundreds of employees in that state. Moving these state law cases into federal court will delay and likely deny justice for working men and women and victims of discrimination. The federal courts are already overburdened. Additionally, federal courts are less likely to certify classes or provide relief for violations of state law".

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This legislation, which dramatically impaired labor rights, consumer rights and civil rights, involved five years of pressure from 100 corporations, 475 lobbyists, tens of millions of corporate dollars buying influence in our government, and the active participation of the Wall Street firms now funding the Obama campaign. "The Civil Justice Reform Group, a business alliance comprising general counsels from Fortune 100 firms, was instrumental in drafting the class-action bill", says Public Citizen.

One of the hardest-working registered lobbyists to push this corporate giveaway was the law firm Mayer-Brown, hired by the leading business lobby group, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, the Chamber of Commerce spent $16 million in just 2003, lobbying the government on various business issues, including class action reform.

According to a 2003 report from Public Citizen, Mayer-Brown's class-action lobbyists included "Mark Gitenstein, former chief counsel to the Senate Judiciary Committee and a leading architect of the Senate strategy in support of class-action legislation; John Schmitz, who was deputy counsel to President George H.W. Bush; David McIntosh, former Republican congressman from Indiana; and Jeffrey Lewis, who was on the staffs of both Sen. John Breaux (D-La) and Rep. Billy Tauzin (R-La)."

While not on the Center for Responsive Politics list of the top 20 contributors to the Obama presidential campaign, Mayer-Brown's partners and employees are in rarefied company, giving a total of $92,817 through December 31, 2007, to the Obama campaign. (The firm is also defending Merrill Lynch in court against charges of racial discrimination.)

Senator Obama graduated Harvard Law magna cum laude and was the first black president of the *Harvard Law Review*. Given those credentials, one assumes that he understood the ramifications to the poor and middle class in this country as he helped to gut one of the few weapons left to seek justice against giant corporations and their legions of giant law firms. The class-action vehicle confers upon each citizen one of the most powerful rights in our society: the ability to function as a private attorney general and seek redress for wrongs inflicted on ourselves as well as for those similarly injured that might not otherwise have a voice.

Those rights should have been strengthened, not restricted, at this dangerous time in our nation's history. According to a comprehensive report from the nonprofit group, United for a Fair Economy, over the past eight years the total loss of wealth for people of color is between $164 billion and $213 billion, for subprime loans which is the greatest loss of wealth for people of color in modern history:

"According to federal data, people of color are three times more likely to have subprime loans: high-cost loans account for 55 per cent of loans to blacks, but only 17 per cent of loans to whites".

Far from keeping his distance from lobbyists, Senator Obama and his campaign seems to be brainstorming with them.

If there had been equitable distribution of subprime loans, losses for white people would be 44.5 per cent higher and losses for people of color would be about 24 per cent lower. "This is evidence of systemic prejudice and institutional racism".

Before the current crisis, based on improvements in median household net worth, it would take 594 more years for blacks to achieve parity with whites. The current crisis is likely to stretch this even further.

So, how should we react when we learn that the top contributors to the Obama campaign are the very Wall Street firms whose shady mortgage lenders buried the elderly and the poor and minority under predatory loans? How should we react when we learn that on the big donor list is Citigroup, whose former employee at CitiFinancial testified to the Federal Trade Commission that it was standard practice to target people based on race and educational level, with the sales force winning bonuses called "Rocopoly Money" (like a sick board game), after "blitz" nights of soliciting loans by phone? How should we react when we learn that these very same firms, arm in arm with their corporate lawyers and registered lobbyists, have weakened our ability to fight back with the class-action vehicle?

Should there be any doubt left as to who owns our government? The very same cast of characters making the Obama hit parade of campaign loot are the clever creators of the industry solutions to the wave of foreclosures gripping this nation's poor and middle class, effectively putting the solution in the hands of the robbers. The names of these programs (that have failed to make a dent in the problem) have the same vacuous ring: Hope Now; Project Lifeline.

Senator Obama has become the inspiration and role model to millions of children and young people in this country. He has only two paths now: to be a dream maker or a dream killer. **CP.**

Pam Martens worked on Wall Street for 21 years; she has no securities position, long or short, in any company mentioned in this article. She writes on public interest issues from New Hampshire. She can be reached at pamk741@aol.com

John McCain, Phony "Maverick"

McCain is often called a "war hero", a title adorning an unlovely resume ranging from a father who was an admiral to the son's graduation fifth from the bottom at the US Naval Academy, where he earned the nickname "McNasty". McCain flew 23 bombing missions over North Vietnam, each averaging about half an hour, total time ten hours and thirty minutes. For these brief excursions the admiral's son was awarded two Silver Stars, two Legions of Merit, two Distinguished Flying Crosses, three Bronze Stars, the Vietnamese Legion of Honor and three Purple Hearts. *US Veteran Dispatch* calculates our hero earned a medal an hour, which is pretty good going.

McCain was shot down over Hanoi on October 26, 1967 and parachuted into Truc Boch Lake, whence he was hauled by Vietnamese, and put in prison. A couple of years later he was interviewed in prison camp by Fernando Barral, a Spanish psychiatrist living in Cuba. The interview appeared in *Granma* on January 24, 1970.

MCCAIN CONTINUED ON PAGE 8

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How Egypt Greeted the People of Gaza

By Jack Brown

Cairo

Official Egypt likes to brag that it has "fought four wars for the Palestinians", referring to its 20th century battles with Israel – which, of course, were fought for reasons both related and unrelated to the Palestinian cause. Egypt's "wars for the Palestinians" ended definitively with the 1978 Camp David accords and Egypt's move toward strategic subordination to the U.S.-Israeli position, as the past month's events on the border between Gaza and Egypt once again underlined.

Since early January, Gaza has been enduring a particularly heavy phase of the more or less eternal Israeli blockade; Israel is preventing food and fuel shipments on top of the normal privations and air strikes. A few weeks ago, Hamas found a solution by blowing a hole in the wall along the border with Egypt. This released a tidal wave of Gaza's hungry and poor. They began streaming into Egypt's border towns in search of food, fuel, cigarettes, and, Israel warned, weapons. Egypt's responsibility to its two patrons was clear in this case: the "sardine can that is Gaza", as a Syrian poet once called it, must be re-sealed.

Typically for a regime which is simultaneously brutal and incompetent Cairo, in trying to please Israel and the United States, has succeeded mainly in further alienating its own people and its supposed friends, the Palestinians. The state's priority seemed to be an end to the influx of Palestinians as quickly as possible, while preventing opposition groups from profiting too much from the incident. To that end, it is making the northern Sinai as inhospitable as possible for Palestinians, by preventing Egyptians from doing business with them. Cairo has halted food and medical shipments from Egyptian NGOs destined for Gaza, shut down businesses on the Egyptian side of the border to prevent Palestinians from buying anything, banned Palestinians from hotels and even coffee shops, and rounded up and deported thousands of Palestinians. Driving through the northern Sinai earlier this month, one could watch platoons of Egyptian soldiers armed with sticks and clubs, encircling dusty farm fields and olive orchards, hunting Palestinians.

Meanwhile, an unsubtle campaign in the state press has attempted to reduce sympathy for the Palestinians, whose cause is supported by virtually all Egyptians. Press accounts routinely cite absurd figures indicating that half the population of the Gaza Strip had decamped for Egypt, that the Palestinians had emptied Sinai's stores of goods (visibly false), suggest that good-hearted Egyptian merchants are being cheated by Palestinians with counterfeit dollars, and that Palestinian terrorists are infiltrating into Egypt by way of the perforated border fence; despite all this, activist networks in Cairo and other cities report an overwhelming popular outpouring of support and donations for the Gazans.

Official Egypt has, in trying to please Israel and the United States, succeeded mainly in further alienating its own people and its supposed friends, the Palestinians.

To stem the influx of Palestinians, Cairo has beefed up its military presence along the border, plugged new holes which have appeared in the border fence, and instituted a series of checkpoints along the nearby roads, with the double aim of thwarting Palestinians heading to Cairo and preventing supplies and journalists heading toward the border. The official press has several times announced the successful closure of the border, but a recent trip to the area confirmed that Palestinians continued to cross the border with relative ease, seeking food, work, or reunions with family members. The checkpoints are almost entirely manned by agents and soldiers from the distant Nile Valley, and the outsiders aren't particularly effective at stopping the flow: locals from both sides of the border fence regarded the road checkpoints and patrols as more of an inconvenience than a threat to their new freedom of movement.

At the Mubarak Peace Bridge, which crosses the Suez Canal north of Ismailia, a combined force of soldiers, Interior Ministry troops, and State Security agents were earlier this month enforcing the Egyptian state's blockade: in addition to checking for Palestinians heading toward Cairo, food, medicine and journalists destined for Gaza and the Egyptian border were barred from entering the Sinai Peninsula, the area of Egypt on the eastern side of the canal which borders both Gaza and Israel. A three-truck convoy bearing 80 tons of food and medicine, gathered by the opposition Muslim Brothers and overseen by opposition parliamentary deputy Sabir, sat parked beside the bridge, shunted aside for unexplained reasons. Sabir was confident that his idled convoy would eventually pass; it ultimately did, but was again stopped near the border, the drivers and loaders arrested and shipped off to Qantara Prison. The supplies now wait in al-Arish, the large city near the border with Gaza. At the bridge, State Security agents told journalists that they lacked a nonexistent form from the Ministry of Information, and thus would not be permitted to enter Sinai; the state apparently wants to minimize press coverage of its activities in the area.

There are other ways into Sinai, however. In al-Arish later that night, unaccustomed rain was falling on the gray cinderblock buildings and rutted streets; most shops were closed or half-closed in anticipation of another round of harassment by the state, and Palestinians went from hotel to hotel seeking rooms for the night. But State Security had been there before them, and warned hotel owners of severe consequences if they were caught with Palestinians in their rooms. At a hotel on the town's main street, one of the owners reported that his brother had been arrested the night before merely for having two Palestinians seated in the hotel's waiting room. So, at hotels like this one, as well as restaurants and coffee shops, people from Gaza were being turned away with a curt "Palestinians

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prohibited".

"I've got all of this money with me, and they don't want to take it", said Dalal, 27, showing a handful of large-denomination Egyptian bills, after being rebuffed. A cleaning woman at a government office in Gaza who had crossed at the Rafah breach earlier in the day said she was unconcerned at being chased out of al-Arish's hotels. "I'm not going to sleep on the street, I'll always find somewhere to stay, maybe with a family". Two brothers had already been to al-Arish and back earlier in the week but, Dalal said, "I had some personal things I wanted to buy myself, and diesel fuel".

The diesel might prove to be a problem, however. At the gas station up the street, a line of riot police surrounded the pumps until late in the night. A pharmacist across the street, expressing his disgust at the state's treatment of the Gazans, said they were there to keep the Palestinians from buying gas or diesel for their generators back home. Other residents said it was to prevent the Palestinians from buying up all the fuel in town. The police themselves weren't saying.

Al-Arish is a Bedouin town of some 100,000, close to Gaza; a third of its residents are of Palestinian ancestry. It and other nearby towns share closer historical links to Palestine than to the distant Nile Valley; locals refer to new arrivals from there as "Egyptians". The sense of alienation from Cairo can only have deepened in the past three years: after a huge truck-bombing at the Taba resort in 2004, the state rounded up some 3,000 people in al-Arish and, according to local and international rights organizations, submitted hundreds of them to savage torture in an effort to root out what the state believed was a radical terrorist organization based there. The series of bombings across the Sinai which followed were considered by some to be revenge against the state for this campaign of torture and intimidation.

The attitude of local Egyptians to the state's campaign against the Palestinians was, thus, of grudging and superficial cooperation. In Shaykh Zwayd, a small town a few kilometers from the border, merchants warily kept their shops half-open one afternoon earlier this month: the state had decreed that they should be closed in order to keep Palestinians from buying in them, but commerce clearly trumped law here. When a truckload of State Security agents and what looked like plainclothes men or thugs armed with sticks careened down the main street, shopkeepers hastily pulled down steel shutters; the thugs descended from the truck and began beating the unwary with sticks, to occasional admonitions from State Security agents ("not in front of the journalists"). The truck moved on to the next town, and soon the shutters came back up. A few hours later, a group of young Palestinian men settled in at a coffee shop up the street, reporting that they had crossed the supposedly closed border in the morning. Where were they headed? Oh, they were just having a look around in Egypt. Maybe they'd stop in at al-Arish later in the day. It seemed more likely that they were on their way to Cairo in hopes of finding work. The tightened border security and the police and the checkpoints weren't to be taken too seriously, they said, offering to help a journalist cross into Palestine.

Activist networks in Cairo and other cities report an overwhelming popular outpouring of support and donations for the Gazans.

It now appears that the Egyptians – with Israeli and American encouragement – have succeeded in resealing the border, but not without significant political cost. A couple of weeks ago, the Egyptian foreign minister, Ahmad Abu al-Ghait, was widely quoted in the local press telling Gazans that if they crossed the border, their legs would be broken: an apparently conscious echo of Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin's admonition to troops fighting the unarmed demonstrators of the first Palestinian Intifada to "break their bones". The Muslim Brothers, meanwhile, have come out looking good despite the best efforts of the state. They have responded to the crisis in Gaza and northern Sinai with their usual impeccable timing and methodical efficiency; even secular activists in Cairo channeled much of their donation drive through the Brothers, despite the yawning difference in political programs. A good number of Brothers took the opportunity in the past weeks to cross over into Gaza and re-establish old contacts (Hamas is a Brotherhood offshoot, and many of its leaders studied at Egyptian universities with today's Egyptian Brotherhood leaders).

Hosam al-Shurbagi, local representative of the Brotherhood-affiliated Egyptian Syndicate of Doctors and head of the syndicate's Relief Committee, was proud of his organization's efforts in an interview in al-Arish earlier this month. "In the first two days after the border was opened, we brought 4,500 tons of food into Gaza, along with 12 million guineas' worth of medicine [5.5 guineas, aka Egyptian pounds = $1] plus 51 electric generators. But [the Egyptian State] stopped everything on the third day. Now they say the trucks won't pass unless the shipments have Red Crescent stickers. Well, we'll put Red Crescent stickers on them then". The Egyptian Red Crescent is run by President Hosni Mubarak's wife; however, it seems likely that beneficiaries will hear about the aid's real provenance, as will most interested Egyptians. **CP**

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COCKBURN CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

As Forest Hylton described brilliantly in this newsletter a year ago, city agencies, the RAND corporation, and the intellectual artificers of "planned shrinkage" conspired together as "finishers" of whole neighborhoods, even boroughs. Between 1970 and 1980, 1.3 million white people left the city and some 600,000 blacks and Latinos were displaced within it, as thousands of homes were confiscated, flattened by bulldozers or burned down in huge gentrification programs. If you add up the forced clearances of poor people across the past 40 years, from New York and the East Coast cities, across the heartlands and on to San Francisco and Los Angeles, you have a chronicle of forced displacements totting up to many millions of people, which still continues.

In sync with this historical arc, the vast slum projects on Chicago's south side known as the Robert Taylor Homes, setting for Sudhir Venkatesh's *Gang Leader for a Day*, don't exist any more. The bulldozers started rolling in the early 1990s, only thirty years after the mini-city of 28 high rises went up, constructed on French modernist principles, a 2-mile by 2-block concrete desert into which the Chicago Housing Authority had very loose authority over 27,000 people: 99.9 per cent black, 95 per cent jobless and on welfare, over 40 per cent of the heads of household being single mothers.

Venkatesh's colorful and sympathetic memoir is a snapshot, just like those you see pinned on sticks alongside American highways where a car or truck took its human cargo into the hereafter. It's not the reminiscence of a denizen of the Projects, but of a sociologist who encountered the Homes at the start of the Nineties in their terminal stage, dangerous and filthy, controlled by drug gangs, the cops present mostly to accept bribes or exact levies from the gangs at gunpoint.

Venkatesh, a young Indian sociologist, born in Madras and raised in comfortable middle-class academic circumstances in southern California, embarked on his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago in 1989. The dominant figure at the UC sociology department at that time was William Julius Wilson, famous for arguing in such books as *When Work Disappears* and *The Truly Disadvantaged* that contrary to right-wing bestiaries of ghetto blacks in terms of psychological, intellectual and even genetic deficits, the core problem was work. Without work – stable, well-paying jobs – any community will slide downhill, with blacks at the bottom of the heap.

The young Indian, Sudhir Venkatesh, soon got bored poring over data sets and yearned to scrutinize actual poor people. In the case of the University of Chicago, as with many other top-tier American campuses, desperately poor black people were available for scrutiny only a few blocks away. Wilson was embarking on a big new study of poverty and told Venkatesh to put together a questionnaire and start interviewing.

"You want to understand how black folks live in the Projects. Why we are poor. Why we have so much crime. Why we can't feed our families. Why our kids can't get work when they grow up. So will you be studying white people?"

To the homeboys lounging about in the stairwells of the Projects, selling crack and fending off any competition, Venkatesh must have been an odd sight, a tall dark-skinned fellow with a pony-tail and a tie-dye shirt, memento of his Deadhead cultural affiliations, flourishing a researcher's clipboard and asking, "How does it feel to be black and poor?" They figure him as a member of a Mexican gang, or as an Arab, and hold him till the gang leader, J.T., a college dropout with a talent for organizing, assays Venkatesh's academic credentials, his origins, and in short order says he can stay around, thus setting Venkatesh on a research path that eventually led him to Harvard, and currently to Columbia University in New York. His years of research in the Robert Taylor Homes have already yielded two formal academic works (in 2000, *American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto* and, in 2006, *Off the Books: the Underground Economy of the Urban Poor*) and a 2005 movie "Dislocation". In 2006, he made a much noticed appearance in chapter 3 ("Why Do Drug Dealers Still Live with Their Moms?") of Levitt and Dubner's bestselling *Freakonomics*, about the economics of crack cocaine at the retail level.

Venkatesh doesn't do much more than gesture in a sentence or two about how exactly he earned the trust of J.T. and other powerful people in the Projects such as the tenant leader, Ms. Bailey. In keeping with this laconic, understated mode – one has the sense now and then of a book written in something of a hurry – he doesn't broach the subject of his own ethnic origins, but it obviously helped that he isn't white. At all events, the laid-back personality that led J.T. and others to trust young Sudhir emerges clearly from his descriptions – at once sympathetic and detached – of slum life and the endless battles of the very poor to make it to the end of the day in one piece. His dry Indian eye allows him to sketch in vivid detail the entrepreneurial hive at the Robert Taylor Homes.

The Projects come alive in Venkatesh's glancing descriptions: urine-soaked stairwells inhabited by squatters and cruised by hookers; the 16-story buildings' bleak outside corridors savaged by Chicago's winter winds; welcoming apartments in which heroic mothers raise their kids and cram Sudhir's plate with soul food as he writes up his notes. His posture is genuinely one of respect. The gang members are not the "superpredators", demonized by the right-wing criminologists who dominated discussions of the ghetto and of the posture of the justice system toward gangs in the late Eighties and Nineties. They're humans given scant choices. "You want to understand how black folks live in the Projects", Ms. Bailey tells Venkatesh. "Why we are poor. Why we have so much crime. Why we can't feed our families. Why our kids can't get work when they grow up. So will you be studying white people?"

Declining a pose of moral affront, Venkatesh's particular talent is to have figured out how the building worked as a business enterprise; how the truly desperate squeeze a hundred dollars a month out of recycling trash; how the hookers rate their services. He had one huge stroke of good fortune in the form of a secret gift of the gang's business ac-

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counts, methodically maintained by J.T.'s bookkeeper, T-Bone. Using the bookkeeper's notebook, he established exactly what the junior drug vendors in J.T.'s army were making (minimum wage, hence the need to live with their moms), what J.T. himself was pulling down (from $30,000 a year, up to as much as $100,000 at his apex), the levies extorted by the gang from local shopkeepers, from the squatters, from the hookers. He explains how a vast urban slum was actually governed by innumerable *quid pro quos* and intricate contracts which, being unwritten and with the rule of law not accessible to its inhabitants, were enforced by the threat or the direct exercise of violence.

Adopting a modified Candidean posture as the West Coast naïf in darkest Chicago, Venkatesh lets the reader know early on that yes, he witnessed more or less mutely some bad stuff, initially when J.T. beats up an elderly squatter called C-Note who refuses to quit working on a car in an area the gang wants to use for basketball:

"'I told you, nigger', J.T. said, his face barely an inch away from C-Note's, 'but you just don't listen, do you?' He sounded exasperated but there was also a sinister tone to his voice I'd never heard before. 'Why are you making this harder?' He started slapping C-Note on the side of the head, grunting with each slap, C-Note's head flopping back and forth like a toy … then J.T.'s henchmen pushed him to the ground. They took turns kicking him, one in the back and the other in the stomach."

It takes C-Note two months to recover from the beating. Venkatesh writes a few pages later:

"J.T. and I resumed our normal relationship… I kept my questions to myself… While I was by no means comfortable watching drug addicts smoke crack, the C-Note affair gave me greater pause. He was an old man in poor health; he could hardly be expected to defend himself against men twice his size and half his age, men who also happened to carry guns… But I didn't do anything. I'm ashamed to say I didn't confront J.T. about it until some six months later, and even then I did so tentatively. "

This observer/participant theme weaves its way uncertainly through the book. Venkatesh's academic advisors remind him that witnessing criminal activities renders him liable to subpoenas and even charges of conspiracy. More experienced ethnographers caution him against excessive involvement with his subjects. Venkatesh's own entrepreneurial instincts prompt him to assert too shrilly the originality of his research methods (i.e., directly observing poor people), also to contrive the signally unconvincing chapter that gives the book its title, *Gang Leader for a Day*. It's plain enough Venkatesh was nothing of the sort. Under the careful eye of J.T. and his lieutenants, he is allowed to make a few inconsequential decisions before surrendering the imaginary role.

It's as a participant that Venkatesh makes the astounding decision to disclose to J.T. and Ms. Bailey the actual earnings disclosed to him by the small-time hustlers, hookers, and marginal players, whose confidence he has fostered down the years. Furious at the news of tiny profits undisclosed to them, J.T. and Ms. Bailey promptly exact retribution, thus earning Venkatesh the well-merited suspicion of his erstwhile informants. Venkatesh, remorseful across several pages, never really explains his shameful conduct, and one can only conclude that it was the pride of the business analyst that led him on. He couldn't resist strutting his stuff to J.T. and Ms. Bailey. Cold shouldered in the building he takes his woes to a friendly hooker, Clarisse:

"It was a time for women", Ms. Levy says, "a place for women. The men ruined everything."

"Clarisse sensed my anxiety. As she talked – laughing heartily all the while, at my expense – she started massaging my shoulder. 'Don't worry, little baby! You probably never had an ass whuppin', have you?'… I must have looked truly frightened, for Clarisse stopped laughing and took on a sincere tone. 'Folks forgive around here,' she said gently. 'We're all religious people, sweetheart. We have to put up with a lot of shit from our own families, so nothing you did to us will make things much worse.'"

History sidles briefly into the book. Old black men muse nostalgically on the days of the Black Panthers, who offered social services along with incendiary politics to the ghetto. An older woman, Cordella Levy, recalls how women used to run social life in the Projects before the possibility of decent local employment disappeared and the drug gangs came in, establishing the cash nexus and the rule of force as the motor of social relations. "It was a time for women", Ms. Levy says, "a place for women. The men ruined everything". Young men like J.T. who beats up C-Note. Eventually Venkatesh asks him why, and J.T. answers: "C-Note was challenging my authority… I had niggers watching me, and I had to do what I had to do".

That sense of insecurity and impermanence – in jobs, relationships, lodging, life itself – that so imbues the lives of poor people takes over Venkatesh's book in its final chapters. The Robert Taylor Homes are scheduled for demolition, and amid the rubble lies J.T.'s empire. There's uplifting talk about new and improved housing opportunities for the displaced residents, but the reality is the same as the fate of the poor of New Orleans: dismal exile to remote and squalid lodgings, torn from all familiar ties, as the old Projects are torn down to make way for gentrification.

Venkatesh says that J.T.'s lieutenant, T-Bone, the one who secretly gave him the gang's ledgers, got ten years for drug trafficking and died in prison. J.T. gets out of the gang business, but his barbershop fails. He thought he was going to be the hero of Venkatesh's book, and presumably by now has realized that this was a role Venkatesh had reserved for himself, crowing on the last page that he was "a rogue sociologist, breaking conventions and flouting the rules". Of course, the roguery has done him no end of good, and *Gang Leader for a Day* will probably end up as a movie. And the moral is… But no, there's no moral of the sort Venkatesh's supervisor, William Julius Wilson, might have written about how to fight poverty. At least in this book, Venkatesh is a describer, not a reformer, which gives his interesting memoir a thoroughly modern, albeit rather chill feel, rather like the new name for the low-rise, mixed-use development that has replaced the Robert Taylor Homes, themselves named for a 1940s black crusader for decent housing for blacks in Chicago. The new zone is called "Legends South". **CP**

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MCCAIN CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

Here's how Barral described "the personality of the prisoner who is responsible for many criminal bombings of the people". Barral goes on, "He (McCain) showed himself to be intellectually alert during the interview. From a morale point of view he is not in traumatic shock. He was able to be sarcastic, and even humorous, indicative of psychic equilibrium. From the moral and ideological point of view he showed us he is an insensitive individual without human depth, who does not show the slightest concern, who does not appear to have thought about the criminal acts he committed against a population from the absolute impunity of his airplane, and that nevertheless those people saved his life, fed him, and looked after his health and he is now healthy and strong. I believe that he has bombed densely populated places for sport. I noted that he was hardened, that he spoke of banal things as if he were at a cocktail party."

The press has slobbered over McCain the "maverick" for years. As the Phoenix-based reporter Amy Silverman once put it, "as long as he's the noble outsider, McCain can get away with anything it seems – the Keating Five, a drug-stealing wife, nasty jokes about Chelsea Clinton – and the pundits will gurgle and coo."

McCain is the kind of Republican that liberals love: solid military credentials as a former POW, ever ready with acceptable soundbites on campaign finance reform and other cherished issues. Thus it was that McCain drew enthusiastic plaudits in the 1990s when he rose in the Senate chamber to denounce the insertion of $200 million worth of pork in the military construction portion of the defense authorization bill. Eloquently, he spoke of the 11,200 service families on food stamps, the lack of modern weapons supplied to the military, the declining levels of readiness in the armed forces. Bravely, he laid the blame at the doors of his colleagues: "I could find only one commonality to these projects, and that is that 90 percent of them happened to be in the state or districts of members of the Appropriations Committees." Sternly, in tones befitting a Cato or a Cicero, he urged his colleagues to ponder their sacred duty to uphold the defense of the Republic rather than frittering away the public purse on such frivolous expenditure: "We live in a very dangerous world. We will have some serious foreign policy crises. I am not sure we have the military that is capable of meeting some of these foreseeable threats, but I know that what we are doing with this $200 million will not do a single thing to improve our ability to meet that threat."

In the gallery, partisans of pork-free spending silently cheered while those who hoped to profit from portions of the $200 million gnashed their teeth in chagrin. Yet, such emotions were misplaced on either side. This was vintage McCain. Had he wished to follow words with deeds, he could have called for a roll call on the items he had just denounced so fervently. That way the looters and gougers would have had to place their infamy on the record. But no, McCain simply sat down and allowed the offending expenditure to be authorized in the anonymous babble of a voice vote ("All those in favor say Aye"). Had McCain really had the courage of his alleged convictions he could have filibustered the entire $250 billion authorization bill, but, inevitably, no such bravery was in evidence. Instead, when the $250 billion finally came to a vote, he voted for it. **CP**

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